

Statement of William R. Deere
Director, UNRWA Representative Office Washington
before the
Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights
May 6, 2024

Chairwoman Ataullahjan, Deputy Chair Bernard, members of the committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Standing Committee today to discuss the situation in Gaza. My name is William Deere and I serve as the Director of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) representative office for Canada and the United States.

On behalf of the 30,000 staff at UNRWA, let me begin by thanking the Canadian people and its government for their ongoing support of the Agency as we pursue our critical humanitarian and human development work on behalf of Palestine refugees in Gaza, the West Bank including East Jerusalem, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan.

Canada's ongoing financial support for the Agency is deeply appreciated but let me also add that Canada's political support for UNRWA is equally critical, particularly now when the Agency and the people it serves once again find themselves under existential threat.

Though I have only been Director of UNRWA's North American office for a little over two years, necessity has already required me to reach out to the Canadian government on short notice several times in search of critical support. Each time, Canada has been there for us, which is part of my motivation to appear here today - to say in person - thank you Canada.

From UNRWA's perspective, it is a timely moment for this hearing. Let me begin by discussing UNRWA's mandate from the United Nations General Assembly and how we operationalize that mandate. I will then touch on our work as the backbone of the humanitarian response in Gaza and conclude with a few words about the current existential threat facing the Agency.

UNRWA – its mandate and mission

Following the 1948 War, UNRWA was established by United Nations General Assembly Resolution to carry out direct relief and works programmes for Palestine refugees. The Agency began operations on 1 May 1950. In the absence of a just and lasting solution to the Palestine refugee problem, the General Assembly has continuously renewed UNRWA's mandate, most recently extending it until 30 June 2026.

Palestine refugees are defined, in broad terms, as “persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict, and descendants of such persons including legally adopted children, through the male line.”

UNRWA services are available to all those living in its area of operations - Gaza, the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan, who are registered with the Agency and

who need assistance. When the Agency began operations in 1950, it was responding to the needs of about 750,000 Palestine refugees and initially some 17,000 internally displaced Jews in Israel. Today, 75 years after the 1948 War and absent a just and lasting solution to their plight, some 5.9 million Palestine refugees are eligible for UNRWA services.

However, not all registered refugees avail themselves of the Agency's services. Reasons include - for example - having no need for assistance or having moved outside of UNRWA areas of operations. The annual UNRWA budget is based on the number of people in need accessing services, not the total number of those registered.

The Agency is also unique in the UN system as it operates as a direct service provider, offering a number of government-like services including education, primary healthcare, protection, and relief and social services including cash and food assistance, and case management. Other services include camp sanitation and hospitalization support. These services play a critical role in meeting the basic needs of those who receive them and are often the only services accessible to Palestine refugees.

In 2023, almost 545,000 children were enrolled in UNRWA schools; Social Safety Net Programme assistance reached 398,000 beneficiaries; and over 1.7 million received lifesaving humanitarian assistance. This includes those affected by occupation, blockade, conflict and violence in the occupied Palestinian territory as well as those refugees facing economic marginalization, internal displacement and, for some refugees, lack of legal status in other areas where UNRWA operates.

The recent independent review of UNRWA, led by former French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna [concluded](#), "In the absence of a political solution between Israel and the Palestinians, UNRWA remains pivotal in providing life-saving humanitarian aid and essential social services, particularly in health and education, to Palestinian refugees in Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the West Bank. As such, UNRWA is irreplaceable and indispensable to Palestinians' human and economic development."

UNRWA and UNHCR – complementary mandates yet critical differences

Let me take a moment to discuss the differences between UNRWA and our sister Agency, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as it has a direct bearing on the Standing Committee's interests.

UNHCR does not have a mandate over Palestine refugees receiving protection and assistance from UNRWA within the UNRWA fields of operations. This is not a decision on the part of either UNRWA or UNHCR, but rather the result of decisions of the international community enshrined in the 1951 Refugee Convention and the UNHCR Statute (adopted by the General Assembly).

In 1949, the UN General Assembly established two different UN refugee agencies – the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East – to respond to distinct refugee crises. The UN General Assembly provided these Agencies with complementary mandates to assist and protect refugees, as laid out in relevant instruments, including the Statute of UNHCR (adopted by a

General Assembly resolution) and the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (an international treaty). Neither UNRWA nor UNHCR can unilaterally change these instruments.

The UNRWA mandate extends to the delivery of services to Palestine refugees within its five fields of operations: the West Bank including East Jerusalem, Gaza, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. Therefore, Palestine refugees within these fields do not fall under UNHCR's mandate. However, UNHCR has a mandate regarding Palestine refugees when they are outside the UNRWA areas of operations and not receiving protection and assistance from UNRWA, such as in Egypt.

Unlike UNHCR, UNRWA does not have a mandate to resettle Palestine refugees and has no authority to seek lasting durable solutions for refugees. UNRWA is mandated by the UN General Assembly to provide services to Palestine refugees in its five fields of operations, pending a just and lasting solution to their plight. [Protracted refugee situations](#) are the result of the failure to find political solutions to their underlying political crises.

In addition, UNHCR is not a direct service provider and the direct comparison of the budgets of the two agencies and the staff required to deliver the respective mandates are deceptive. UNRWA operates as a quasi-state body delivering government-like services, while UNHCR provides international protection with any assistance provided usually through partners.

It is also worth noting that the protracted situation in which Palestine refugees live is not unique. Examples of other protracted refugee communities include Afghanistan, Angola, Bhutan, Burma, Burundi, Congo/DRC, Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan, Tibet, and Western Sahara.

UNHCR aims for three "durable solutions" for refugees: voluntary return to original homes (preferred), local integration (requires host country acceptance), and third country resettlement. The grim reality is that less than 0.5 percent of refugees worldwide are ever resettled.

Even if UNRWA was to cease providing protection or assistance to Palestine refugees without a resolution to their plight and they were to fall under UNHCR's mandate, they would still be refugees and retain their rights, including the right of return, under General Assembly Resolution 194. Any durable solution for refugees sought by UNHCR would still depend on all relevant parties agreeing to such a solution. In essence, from a rights perspective, dismantling UNRWA would not change the situation. Palestine refugees would retain their status and be entitled to assistance and protection. It would simply mean that the Agency that provides critical services to the Palestine refugee community ceases to function.

UNRWA – the backbone of the humanitarian response in Gaza

Of the five fields in which UNRWA operates, Gaza with its 1.6 million registered Palestine refugees, utilizes the largest amount of UNRWA services. Prior to October 7th, UNRWA's 13,000 Gaza staff educated over 300,000 girls and boys at some 288 schools and two TVET centers. UNRWA's 22 primary health centers provided some 3.4 million annual patients visits, and social services including emergency food and cash assistance were provided to some 1.2 million people.

Given the Agency's large operational footprint in Gaza, UNRWA has led the humanitarian response to the ongoing tragedy. On 24-April, Sigrid Kaag, the Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator for Gaza [told the UN Security Council](#) that UNRWA "is pivotal in providing life-saving humanitarian aid and essential social services to Palestine refugees. As such, UNRWA is irreplaceable and indispensable as a humanitarian lifeline and must be allowed to deliver on its mandate."

UNRWA's latest "finest hour"

The UNRWA fields of operation make the Agency no stranger to working in conflict situations and in Gaza today it is UNRWA's latest - finest hour. Over 2,500 of our staff, most of whom have themselves been displaced multiple times, stay on the job, supported by an additional 3,000 Gazans supporting them as part of our job creation programme. The scale of destruction, loss of civilian life and dire humanitarian conditions created by the conflict are without precedent even in Gaza.

My UNRWA colleagues are present at the bordering crossings, operating warehouses and distribution centers to receive and deliver aid, though the volume of aid allowed to enter Gaza continues to remain grossly insufficient. They are providing critical support and individual case management at the UNRWA facilities still standing. Our health teams continue to work at our eight remaining health centers and at 86 medical points at 56 shelters treating approximately 20,000 patients a day.

These dedicated people, many of whom have been displaced themselves and lost friends or family members, refuse to abandon their posts and continue to deliver humanitarian aid while the UN continues to call for safe, unimpeded access for humanitarian teams in and throughout Gaza. UNRWA staff have proven over and over again to be innovative, flexible, and courageous. The coordination between multiple UN humanitarian agencies in delivering aid while under fire is extraordinary.

Shortly after the tragic events of October 7th, UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini stated, "Last week's attack on Israel was horrendous – devastating images and testimonies continue to come out. The attack and the taking of hostages are a flagrant violation of international humanitarian law. But the answer to killing civilians cannot be to kill more civilians." Sadly, that is what we have seen play itself out over the last seven months, nowhere and no one safe in Gaza.

Making the humanitarian relief mission even harder, the diplomatic privileges and immunities associated with United Nations staff and facilities have been rendered largely meaningless in this conflict. In March, two of my colleagues perished during a drone strike on UNRWA's main logistics facility in Rafah. One of them, a husband and father of two dying while in the act of stacking diapers for humanitarian delivery. But the next day, UNRWA staff in Rafah were back on the job, running the risk because walking away from their fellow Gazan is simply not an option for them.

The Rafah strike was hardly an isolated incident. In April, UNRWA released a report (attached as an appendix to this testimony) documenting 349 incidents impacting our premises and the internally displaced persons (IDPs) sheltering in and around them. The toll is staggering, with at least 408 IDPs (including at least 15 children and seven UNRWA staff) killed and at least 1,406 IDPs (including at least 111 children and 43 UNRWA staff) injured. This includes 51 incidents of interference by parties to the conflict. Sadly, UNRWA has to date lost 182 of our colleagues.

Another UNRWA report issued in April (also attached as an appendix to this testimony), documents the alleged ill-treatment of women, men and children detained by the Israeli military in Gaza, taken to Israel often for weeks at a time, and subsequently released to UNRWA at the Kerem Shalom crossing. UNRWA staff were amongst those detained and ill-treated. According to information UNRWA received, they were subjected to threats and coercion during interrogations to make forced confessions against UNRWA intended to demonstrate the Agency has affiliations with Hamas and that UNRWA staff took part in the October 7th attacks against Israel. The reported tactics being utilized to secure these forced confessions are outlined in the report and nothing less than shocking.

At this writing, it is unclear what will happen in next in Gaza. The people of Rafah, most of whom have been driven to this southernmost point in Gaza by previous Israeli Defense Force operations, wait in fear that they will be forced to flee again. If forced into Egypt, those refugees will be outside UNRWA's area of operation.

UNRWA – once again under existential threat

One would think that an organization performing such extraordinary work in the most difficult of circumstances would be lauded. Instead, UNRWA finds its humanitarian and human development mission once again under existential threat. As we speak, the UNRWA financial situation is dire. Even with the generous support from Canada, the Agency has sufficient funding to operate only through the end of June.

How has this come to pass? As Commissioner-General Lazzarini recently told the [United Nations General Assembly](#) and [Security Council](#), the Agency is facing a deliberate and concerted campaign to undermine its operations, and ultimately end them. Recall, these are operations that are mandated by the United Nations General Assembly.

Part of this campaign involves inundating donors with misinformation designed to foster distrust and tarnish the reputation of the Agency. More blatant, members of the Israeli government are openly stating that UNRWA will not be part of post-war Gaza. There has already been massive destruction of UNRWA infrastructure across Gaza. Further, the Agency's requests to deliver aid to the north of Gaza are repeatedly denied.

This undermining and attack on UNRWA is not restricted to Gaza. In the West Bank, movement restrictions and the banning of local staff from entering occupied East Jerusalem are affecting every aspect of our services. Protests against UNRWA's presence in the West Bank and calls to evict UNRWA from its Headquarters in East Jerusalem, and from a nearby vocational training center for Palestine Refugee youth are underway. Draft legislation in the Israeli Knesset seeks to prohibit outright any activity by UNRWA on Israeli territory.

The ultimate objective of this campaign is to end the refugee status of millions of Palestinians and change the long-standing political parameters for peace in the occupied Palestinian territory set by the resolutions of the UN General Assembly and Security Council. UNRWA provides assistance and protection services to those who fall within its mandate while independent efforts are underway to find a political solution. Accusations that UNRWA deliberately perpetuates refugee status are outrageous. The simple truth is the Agency continues to exist because a political solution does not.

Dismantling UNRWA is short-sighted and will have lasting repercussions. It will deepen the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and accelerate the onset of famine. In the longer-term, it will jeopardize the transition from ceasefire to 'day after' by depriving a traumatized population of essential services. It will make nearly impossible the formidable task of bringing over 300,000 deeply distressed girls and boys back to learning. Failing to deliver on education will condemn an entire generation to despair – fueling anger and resentment.

Going forward

UNRWA echoes the call of UN Secretary-General Guterres for a humanitarian ceasefire, the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages, and a massive surge in humanitarian aid. While we have seen incremental progress recently, much more is urgently needed - including the promised opening of two crossing points between Israel and northern Gaza, so that aid can be brought into Gaza from Ashdod port and Jordan.

Senators, let me also add that all Commissioner-Generals of UNRWA hope to be the last as, again, the Agency was created to be temporary. As Commissioner-General Lazzarini has noted, "It is a stain on our collective conscience that for 75 years UNRWA has had to fill a vacuum left by the lack of a political solution and a genuine peace."

UNRWA hopes that the Member States of the United Nations commit to facilitating a long-overdue political process culminating in a solution that can bring peace to Palestinians and Israelis, and to chart the transition of UNRWA in this context.

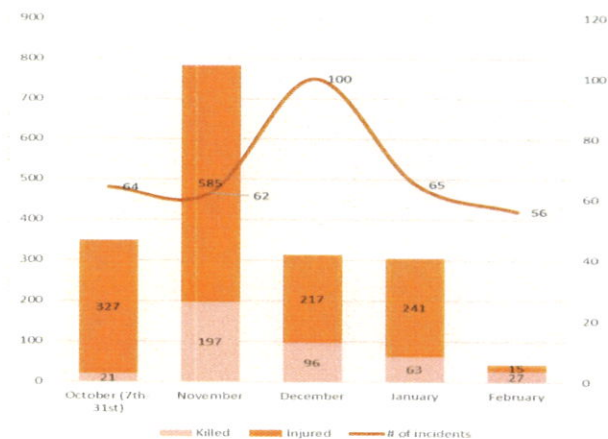
In the immediate term - and given the enormous risks in Gaza and to the entire region – we hope Member States will provide the support UNRWA needs to operate, and to close the gap between UNRWA's mandate and funding model. The Agency cannot fulfill the mandate without commensurate funding from the Member States.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to appear today. I look forward to answering your questions.

Introduction

Since the start of the war on 7 October 2023, people forced to flee their homes across the Gaza Strip have sought safety and protection under the United Nations (UN) flag, primarily in UNRWA premises.ⁱ These buildings, the coordinates of which are shared with parties to the conflict on a regular basis,ⁱⁱ and are clearly marked as UN premises, have been impacted by armed conflict incidents resulting in extensive damage, disruption to services and civilian fatalities at an unprecedented scale.

Graph 1: IDPs killed and injured at UNRWA shelters



Incidents impacting UNRWA premises

Between 7 October 2023 and 15 March 2024, UNRWA documented 349 incidents impacting its premises and internally displaced persons (IDPs) sheltering in and around them. This resulted in the killing of at least 408 IDPs (including at least 15 children and seven UNRWA staff) and injury to at least 1,406 IDPs (including at least 111 children and 43 UNRWA staff). This includes 51 incidents of interference by parties to the conflict.ⁱⁱⁱ

A number of UNRWA premises have been impacted multiple times, as illustrated in the below table.

Schools	261 incidents	120 different premises
Vocational Training Centres	27 incidents	2 different premises
Health Centres	30 incidents	15 different premises
Warehouses^{iv}	7 incidents	5 different premises
Aid distribution centres	6 incidents	6 different premises ^v

For example, the Khan Younis Training Centre (KYTC), which was sheltering 34,407 people up until heavy

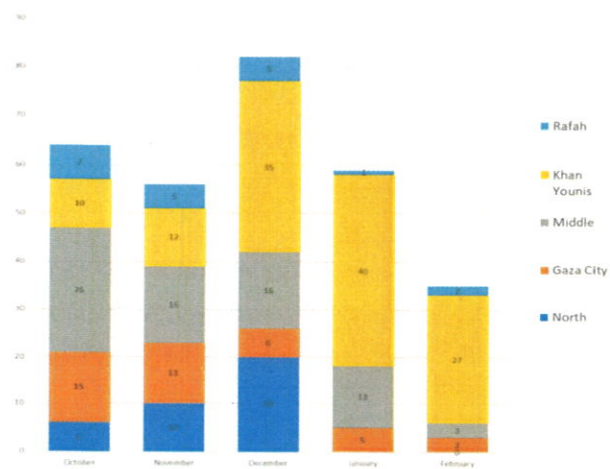
fighting started in the area at the end of January, UNRWA documented 23 separate incidents.

Of the 349 total incidents documented between 7 October 2023 and 15 March 2024, 298 involved munitions apparently fired by parties to the conflict impacting UNRWA premises, including explosive weapons from land, air and sea, and small arms fire.

UNRWA installations across the Gaza Strip have been impacted, resulting in hundreds of casualties.^{vi}

North Gaza	36 incidents	25 different premises	111 fatalities	359 injured
Gaza City	42 incidents	28 different premises	143 fatalities	139 injured
Middle Area	74 incidents	40 different premises	51 fatalities	308 injured
Khan Younis	124 incidents	39 different premises	86 fatalities	444 injured
Rafah	22 incidents	18 different premises	12 fatalities	149 injured

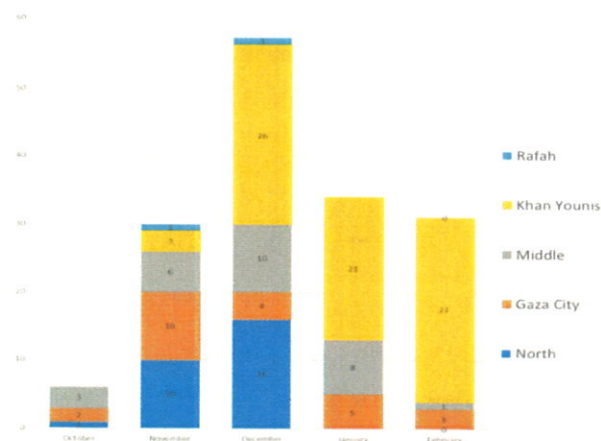
Graph 2: Incidents of munitions hitting UNRWA premises



Direct impacts on UNRWA premises

In 160 incidents, affecting 95 different premises, UNRWA premises have been directly impacted by munitions fired by parties to the conflict. This includes 122 incidents directly impacting 73 different UNRWA schools, 12 incidents directly impacting the KYTC, 14 incidents directly impacting 10 different UNRWA health centres, and two incidents directly impacting two UNRWA distribution centres.^{vii}

Graph 3: Incidents of direct hits on UNRWA premises by month and governorate



UNRWA efforts to protect premises & humanitarian space

UNRWA has been providing the coordinates of all its premises to the parties to the conflict through the UN humanitarian notification system, a longstanding ‘deconfliction’ mechanism. Shortly after 7 October, UNRWA strengthened its engagement with relevant Israeli authorities, and with the de facto authorities (DFA) in Gaza in accordance with the UN’s interaction standards used globally in conflicts around the world. UNRWA consistently protests incidents impacting its premises with the DFA and Israeli authorities, often in real-time, re-confirming the protected nature of the premises and the presence of civilians sheltering inside, including UNRWA staff.

While facts surrounding many incidents remain under verification, the information so far available to UNRWA indicates that damage and/or harm caused in the vast majority of incidents appears to have resulted in whole or in part from attacks and actions undertaken by Israeli Forces (both munitions impacts and interference with UN premises), and a much smaller number of incidents from attacks and actions undertaken by Palestinian armed groups. UNRWA has consistently requested investigations, and to be provided with the outcomes of those investigations, including communicating this at ministerial level,^{viii} requesting any information that may assist with updating or correcting the information for each incident. To date, UNRWA has been provided with only a limited level of information in response to certain cases, particularly in cases under investigation by the Israeli authorities.

Evacuation orders and strikes on UNRWA Premises

From the start of the ground incursion by Israeli forces, people received orders to evacuate areas of Gaza. In addition to orders to evacuate individual buildings, evacuation orders have been issued for entire areas of

the Gaza Strip, initially instructing people to leave their homes and move south of Wadi Gaza. In some instances, shelters hosting IDPs in areas people were instructed to evacuate to were subsequently impacted by munitions; this occurred despite repeated assurances provided to the UN that IDPs could shelter in place in premises south of Wadi Gaza. For example, on 6 January 2024, Israeli Forces distributed flyers to several neighbourhoods in Khan Younis advising to move to “known shelters”.^{ix} Two days later, two IDPs (15- and 30-year-old females) sheltering in a Deir El-Balah UNRWA shelter were injured from an Israeli Forces quadcopter opening fire directly on the shelter.

Interference with UNRWA premises

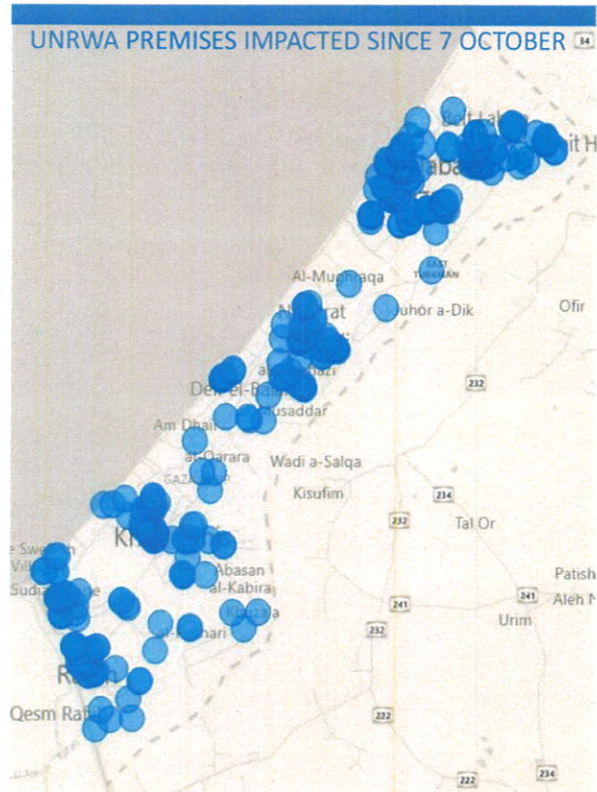
Between 7 October 2023 and 15 March 2024, UNRWA documented at least 51 occasions, impacting 44 different premises, where parties to the conflict interfered with UNRWA premises, including use for military purposes. Of these, 42 incidents took place at schools, three at health centres, two at the UNRWA HQ, one at the Gaza Field Office, one at a vocational training centre, one at a rehabilitation centre for the visually impaired, and one at a relief and social services office. Interference at UNRWA premises included unauthorised entry, forced evacuation of persons sheltering there, and use as firing positions, to store weapons, as barracks, and for resupply missions.

The 1946 Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations provides that the “premises of the United Nations shall be inviolable”; also, that the “property and assets of the United Nations, wherever located and by whomsoever held, shall be immune from search, requisition, confiscation, expropriation and any other form of interference, whether by executive, administrative, judicial or legislative action”.^x The privileges and immunities of the United Nations, including the inviolability of UN premises, must be respected at all times, including during times of conflict. UN agencies such as UNRWA must ensure UN premises are used for official purposes and in accordance with humanitarian principles as well as the values and principles of the UN. UNRWA discharges its responsibilities through a range of measures, including taking the necessary steps to safeguard the neutrality of its premises, including necessary remedial action once a breach is confirmed.

Since the start of the hostilities on 7 October 2023, Israel has raised several allegations that the neutrality of UNRWA premises has been compromised by the

presence of weapons or the existence of tunnels underneath certain installations. UNRWA has requested further information and evidence about such allegations but has not received a substantive response. UNRWA has previously investigated and protested any such substantiated allegations and has taken remedial action when appropriate. UNRWA premises appear to have been intentionally damaged and destroyed by Israeli forces, including deliberately setting fire to the premises, and apparent controlled demolition with explosives, including several in connection with such allegations. For example, between 20 November and 29 December 2023, part or all of seven UNRWA schools - five in the North, one in Khan Younis, and one in the Middle Area appear to have been intentionally destroyed.

UNRWA has also documented family separation and detention of persons who were sheltering at UNRWA premises, including UNRWA personnel, following the unauthorised entry of Israeli Forces into these premises. Many reported ill-treatment.



ⁱ The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), has premises across the Gaza strip including schools, health centres, vocational training centres, distribution centres, warehouses, offices, and others.

ⁱⁱ Prior to 7 October 2023, UNRWA had been providing regular updates through a longstanding UN notification system on the coordinates of all of its premises to representatives from the parties to the conflict. Shortly after 7 October, in accordance with the UN's interaction standards used globally in conflicts around the world, UNRWA additionally strengthened its own regular contact with the de facto authorities in Gaza (DFA), the Israeli Office for Coordination of Government Affairs in the Territories (COGAT) and the Israeli Civil Liaison Administration (CLA), to better protect its staff, premises, and persons sheltering under the UN flag. This included regular sharing of coordinates of UNRWA premises, as well as regular protesting of incidents impacting those premises and the people sheltering there.

ⁱⁱⁱ The number of casualties documented in this report remain subject to continuous change as incidents are late reported and further information is received on the number of persons killed and injured, including changes in the condition of those injured. Information is current as of the time of publication, based on initial information received by UNRWA, and remain subject to further verification and revision.

^{iv} The "warehouse" incidents includes premises classified as both warehouses and non-food item (NFI) stores; the remaining incidents impacted UNRWA international staff residences, social work offices, and field office and headquarters premises.

^v The remaining 14 premises impacted included a range of other premises types, including international staff residences.

^{vi} Due to access restrictions to the North and Gaza City, the figures presented are expected to be severely under-reported.

^{vii} One incident of direct impact was recorded at the Gaza Training Centre in Gaza City as well. The remaining eight incidents of direct impacts struck three other types of UNRWA premises, including international staff residences. UNRWA notes only whether the munition struck the UNRWA premises (directly) or whether it struck something else nearby and the debris and/or shrapnel falling into the UNRWA premises resulted in damage and/or casualties (indirectly).

^{viii} On 18 February 2024, the UNRWA Commissioner-General sent a letter to the Israeli Minister of Defence, with copy to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and COGAT, attaching details of the incidents impacting UNRWA premises through 31 January 2024, all of which had been shared with COGAT during and/or after each incident occurred. Further interventions at this level are expected on an ongoing basis as long as UNRWA premises and those sheltering in them continue to be affected by armed conflict incidents.

^{ix} The flyer stated: "the area you are in is a fighting area. For your own safety, head immediately to the known shelters in Deir El-Balah."

^x Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations, 13 February 1946, Article II, Section 3.

Detention and alleged ill-treatment of detainees from Gaza during Israel-Hamas War

This report is based on information obtained as a result of UNRWA's role coordinating humanitarian aid at the Karem Abu Salem (Kerem Shalom) crossing point between Gaza and Israel, where the Israel Defence Forces have been regularly releasing detainees since early November 2023, and from information provided to UNRWA independently and voluntarily by Palestinians released from detention, including men, women, children and staff members. This report does not provide a comprehensive account of all of the issues regarding individuals detained during the Israel-Hamas war, and notably does not cover any issues concerning the hostages taken by Hamas on 7 October or other concerns regarding the treatment of any detainees in Gaza by Palestinian armed actors.

Shortly after Israel Defence Forces (IDF) launched ground operations in the Gaza Strip towards the end of October 2023, reports of Palestinians being detained in northern Gaza began to emerge. UNRWA began recording the detention of men and women sheltering inside the Agency's facilities by the IDF starting 12 November 2023.¹ On 16 December, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights reported receiving "numerous reports of mass detentions, ill-treatment and enforced disappearance of possibly thousands of Palestinian men and boys, and a number of women and girls, at the hands of the Israeli Defence Forces."²

In addition to northern Gaza, detentions have since been reported in the Middle Area of Gaza from December 2023 and in Khan Younis from January 2024. Gazans have reportedly been detained while fleeing to the south, while in their homes during IDF operations, from their places of work including hospitals,³ and while sheltering in UNRWA installations and other facilities.

As of 4 April 2024, UNRWA has documented the release of **1,506 detainees** from Gaza by the Israeli authorities through the Karem Abu Salem (Kerem Shalom) crossing point with Israel. This included 43 children (39 boys, four girls) and 84 women. Among those released were 16 family members of UNRWA staff and 326 Gazan labourers working in Israel. The Agency has also documented the release of 23 UNRWA staff detained by Israeli authorities.

Held incommunicado in unknown locations

Detainees described being transported by trucks to what appeared to be large makeshift "military barracks" housing between 100-120 people, where they were held incommunicado in between periods of interrogation, sometimes for several weeks. Several detainees reported that they were held at the military barracks located at Zikim (just north of Erez in southern Israel), where there is an Israeli military base. Detainees reported also being held at sites around Beer Sheva, identifying Sde Teiman base.⁴

Detainees reported being sent multiple times for interrogations, with a final interview with Shabak (the Israeli domestic intelligence branch). Prior to their

release, detainees were generally transferred to the Israeli Prison System, with Naqab prison in the Negev desert frequently cited. Women reported being taken to Anatot military camp in East Jerusalem and Damon prison in Haifa (northern Israel). Ashkelon detention centre (south), Ofer prison (in the occupied West Bank), Al-Jalame prison in northern Israel and detention in Jerusalem were also reported.

Reports of ill-treatment in detention

Detainees reported ill-treatment during the different stages of their detention. Released detainees included men and women, children, older persons, persons with disabilities, and the injured and sick, all of whom were subjected to similar forms of ill-treatment according to first hand testimonies received by UNRWA. Agency staff at Karem Abu Salem witnessed signs of trauma and ill-treatment among the released detainees. In almost all instances, Palestinian Red Crescent ambulances transported some persons from the crossing to local hospitals due to injury or illness.

"I saw people [in detention] 70 years old, very old. There were people with Alzheimer's, old people who were blind, people with disabilities who couldn't walk, people who had shrapnel in their backs and couldn't stand up, people with epilepsy... and torture was for everyone. Even for people who didn't know their own names. We told them that someone was blind. They didn't care."

Adult male detainee aged 46 years.

Detainees described having all items in their possession confiscated – including identification documents and money – at the time of their detention and generally not returned after their release. Ill-treatment was reported to have occurred primarily while in the barracks, and to have intensified in advance of interrogation sessions. This included being subjected to beatings while made to lie on a thin mattress on top of rubble for hours without food, water or access to a toilet, with their legs and hands bound with plastic ties. Several detainees reported being forced into cages and attacked by dogs. Some released detainees, including a child, had dog bite

wounds on their body. Detainees were threatened with prolonged detention, injury or the killing of family members if they did not provide requested information.

“*[Shabak] showed me my whole neighbourhood on a computer screen and asked me to tell them about all of the persons they pointed to – who is this, who is this, etc. If I didn't recognize someone, the soldier threatened to bomb my home. She asked me who in my home did not evacuate to the south. I told her my brothers and my father stayed at home. She said if you don't confess with all information, we will bomb your home and kill your family.*”

Adult female detainee, 34 years.

Detainees also described being made to sit on their knees for 12-16 hours a day while in the barracks, blindfolded, with their hands tied. Sleep was permitted between midnight and 4-5 AM, with the lights constantly on and fans blowing cold air despite the cold weather. Several detainees reported having wet blankets thrown on them. Other methods of ill-treatment reported by detainees included physical beatings, threats of physical harm, insults and humiliation such as being made to act like animals or getting urinated on, use of loud music and noise, deprivation of water, food, sleep and toilets, denial of the right to pray and prolonged use of tightly locked handcuffs causing open wounds and friction injuries. The beatings included blunt force trauma to the head, shoulders, kidneys, neck, back and legs with metal bars and the butts of guns and boots, in some cases resulting in broken ribs, separated shoulders and lasting injuries.

“*They were beating me with an extendable metal bar. There was blood on my trousers and when they saw it, they beat me there. They used a nail gun on my knee. These nails were kept in my knee for about 24 hours until I was transported to Naqab prison.*”

Adult male detainee, aged 26 years.

Reports of sexual violence and harassment

In most reported detention incidents, the IDF forced males, including children, to strip down to their underwear. UNRWA also documented at least one occasion where males sheltering in an UNRWA installation were forced to strip naked and were detained while naked.

Both men and women reported threats and incidents that may amount to sexual violence and harassment by the IDF while in detention. Male victims reported beatings to their genitals, while one detainee reported being made to sit on an electrical probe.

“*They made me sit on something like a hot metal stick and it felt like fire – I have burns [in the anus]. The soldiers hit me with their shoes on my chest and used something like a metal stick that had a small nail on the side...They asked us to drink from the toilet and made the dogs attack us...There were people who were detained and killed – maybe nine of them. One of them died after they put the electric stick up his [anus]. He got so sick; we saw worms coming out of his body and then he died.*”

Adult male detainee, aged 41 years.

Women described being exposed to psychological abuse, including insults and threats, as well as inappropriate touching during searches and as a form of intimidation and harassment while blindfolded. Both men and women reported being made to strip naked in front of male soldiers during searches and being photographed and filmed while naked.

“*They asked the soldiers to spit on me, saying 'she is a b****, she is from Gaza.' They were beating us as we moved and saying they would put pepper on our sensitive parts [genitals]. They pulled us, beat us, they took us in the bus to the Damon prison after five days. A male soldier took off our hijabs and they pinched us and touched our bodies, including our breasts. We were blindfolded and we were feeling them touching us, pushing our heads to the bus. We started to squeeze together to try to protect ourselves from the touching. They said 'b****, b****.' They told the soldiers to take off their shoes and slap our faces with them.*”

Adult female detainee, 34 years.

Detention of UNRWA staff and reports of forced confessions

UNRWA recorded cases of Palestinian UNRWA staff in Gaza detained by the IDF – including some detained during the performance of their official duties for the UN, including while working at UNRWA installations and in one case during a coordinated humanitarian movement. UNRWA staff were reportedly held incommunicado and subjected to the same conditions and ill-treatment as other detainees, both in Gaza and in Israel.

UNRWA staff members reported being interrogated about the work performed by UNRWA, and the specific functions they perform on behalf of UNRWA. They also reported being subjected to threats and coercion while in detention and being pressured during interrogations to make forced confessions against the Agency, including that the Agency has affiliations with Hamas and that UNRWA staff took part in the 7 October attacks against Israel.

The ill-treatment and abuse against UNRWA staff members as relayed by staff members themselves

included severe physical beatings and treatment akin to waterboarding, resulting in extreme physical suffering; beatings by doctors when referred for medical assistance; exposure to and being attacked by dogs; threats of rape and electrocution; threats of violence with guns pointed at them; verbal and psychological abuse; threats of murder, injury or harm to family members; humiliating and degrading

treatment; being forced to strip naked and being photographed while they are undressed; and being forced to hold stress positions.

UNRWA has made official protests to the Israeli authorities about the reported treatment of Agency staff members while they were in Israeli detention centers. UNRWA has not received any response to these protests to date.

1- On 12 November, UNRWA documented three incidents in the vicinity of Gaza and Beach Camp where persons sheltering at the installations were detained after being forced to leave UNRWA shelters. Another such incident in Gaza was recorded on 8 December, two occurred in Beit Lahiya on 10 December, one was documented in Khan Younis on 12 December. Further incidents occurred in Bureij Camp on 28 December and in Maghazi Camp on 4 January. UNRWA continues to work to verify the details of these incidents.

2- See <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/un-human-rights-office-opt-disturbing-reports-north-gaza-mass-detentions-ill-treatment-and-enforced-disappearances-possibly-thousands-palestinians>

3- The forced evacuation of Al Shifa hospital on 17-18 November 2023 and of Kamal Adwan hospital around 12 December 2023 coincided with the detention of patients and medical workers from both facilities.

4- See <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-01-03/ty-article/.premium/number-of-gazans-detained-in-israel-jumps-150-witness-soldiers-abuse-detainees/0000018c-ca0b-d6c4-ab8d-ebbf60380000>